Christ:
The Gospel of Redemption

Thrust Statement: **Christ is the Gospel of God.**

Scripture Reading: **Galatians 1:4, 15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4**

What is the Gospel of God? Is the Gospel of God twenty-seven books called the New Testament? Is the Gospel of God about accapella singing versus singing with instrumental music? Is the Gospel of God about kitchens in the church building? Is the Gospel of God about one cup (container) on the Lord's Table versus individual cups? Is the Gospel about the manner of breaking the bread in the observance of the Communion—break or pinch? Is the Gospel of God about a so-called worship service with five prescribed rituals that have to be performed in a prescribed manner?

Today, many Christians identify their particular brand of orthodoxy as the Gospel of God. When some Christians refuse to acquiesce to some odd interpretation of Scriptures as espoused by certain fragmented groups, the ones who decline to receive the promoted interpretation are frequently labeled as preaching another gospel. Unfortunately, many Christians associated with the so-called American Restoration movement (Stone/Campbell Movement) do not understand God's Gospel. Out of this unity movement designed to unify Christians in all the sects came three major divisions—Churches of Christ, Christian Churches, and Disciples of Christ.

Today, there are approximately twenty-five divisions within the Churches of Christ alone. **Galatians 1:6-9** is called forth to give credence to one's tenacity in holding steadfastly to one's inherited traditions, traditions mistakenly identified with the Gospel. Those who cite these verses to maintain their traditional view of the Gospel fail to read Paul's definition of the Gospel in **1:4**. In fact, the entire Book of Galatians is a treatise that unfolds the true nature of the Gospel of God. One can say in essence that the Gospel of God is about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The Gospel is about: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (**Acts 4:12**).[1] Again, one can define the Gospel with the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has

committed to us the message of reconciliation" (**2 Corinthians 5:19**). In short, one can say that the Gospel of God is Christ Himself. The primary objective of this essay is to analyze the heart of God's Gospel, not to castigate or condemn those who have not yet reached a true understanding of God's grace in and through Jesus.

When one reflects upon the words of the angel to Joseph concerning the pregnancy of Mary, one is confronted with the beginning of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the One promised to redeem humanity from God's wrath and judgment for transgression(s) of His Laws—"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,[a] because he will save his people from their sins" (**Matthew 1:21**). One is about to witness the unique act of God in human history; that is to say, God becomes flesh (**John 1:14**). The Incarnation reveals that He who is not of history became history through the virgin birth. Paul captures this same concept to the Galatians as he seeks to unfold the Gospel of God: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, [5] to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (**Galatians 4:4-5**). One cannot reflect upon the Gospel of Redemption without a consciousness of the Cross. If one inquires as to what the Gospel of Redemption is, one must say, "It is the Cross."

The Gospel is Good News; it is about how God tasted death for everyone. He reigns, as it were, from the deadly tree. The Cross is central in the preaching of the Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. Again, one can say that the Gospel is Jesus. In the Book of Galatians, Paul calls attention to the preaching of the Gospel to Abraham (2166 BC). The Gospel was proclaimed to Abraham over two thousand years before the virgin birth of Christ. After calling attention to this historical announcement to Abraham, Paul focuses upon the very heart of the Gospel proclaimed: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed,"[a] meaning one person, who is Christ" (**Galatians 3:16**). Earlier in this same book, Paul begins his short Epistle with his definition of the Gospel: "Who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age" (**1:4**). If one preaches the Gospel, one preaches Jesus. Paul states this truth as he seeks to unfold the truth of the Gospel:

> But when God, who set me apart from birth[a] and called me by his grace, was pleased [16] to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, [17] nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus (**1:15-17**).

The death of Jesus for the sins of humanity is found throughout the writings of the New Testament books. Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, summarizes the heart of the Gospel given to him by Jesus, a Gospel which consists in Christ's death:

> Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. [2] By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. [3] For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, [4] that

he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (**1 Corinthians 15:1-4**).

The Cross of Jesus is dominant in the writings of Holy Scripture. Just a perusal of Mark's Gospel reveals the importance of the death of Christ. Almost one half of his Gospel is about the death of Christ. The first Christians faced and conquered the pagan world through the scandalous fact of the Cross of Jesus. The message of the Cross was paramount in the preaching of Paul. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he sets forth the centrality of the Cross: " For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (**1 Corinthians 1:18**). Within the preaching of the Gospel, one is conscious of God's power to transfer one from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ (**Colossians 1:13-14**). Is it any wonder that Paul cries out: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (**2:2**).

The Cross changed the way of counting time. This change from B.C to A. D. authenticates the Christian belief that the Cross of the Messiah is the supreme reality of human existence. The Cross is the decisive center of preaching Christ. Paul writes to the Christians of Colossae about Christ's death and its implications for redemption: "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (**Colossians 1:22**). If the Cross is not the crucial point, how can the human story of Jesus have any significant purpose. The crucifixion of Jesus is the most important event, along with the Resurrection, of human history. In the Cross, one witnesses two events, both poles apart. On one side, one sees the very depths of evil, but, on the other hand, one sees the deeper depth of God's holy love as He condescends to rescue fallen humanity from condemnation. In this act of killing the Son of God, one witnesses the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and, at the same time, the amazing wonder of God's forgiveness. Even in this darkest point of human history, one also sees history's most blinding light—a light that makes one stand in awe and wonder of such love. The Cross of Jesus is God's antidote for the poison of Satan. There has never been anything like this event—God becoming flesh and dying—in the annals of humanity.

It is in the Cross that one observes the real nature and meaning of evil. As one gazes upon the Cross of Christ, one views evil acted out in all its naked blasphemy. This event of Christ's crucifixion was so great that Mark declares, "At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. [34] And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, *"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[a] (**Mark 15:33-34**). This picture of God's Son is without parallel in the records of time. What makes this crucifixion greater than all the other crucifixions of the world? Prior to and after Christ, one still reads about thousands who were crucified. Yet, this crucifixion still stands in the annals of history as the most significant fact in all the history of the world. Why? In the crucifixion of Christ, the One who dies is none other than Incarnate Righteousness and Love. Here was One in whose presence individuals felt the presence of God. Even one of the centurions at the crucifixion knew something was different. Mark calls attention to his reaction: "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and[b] saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son[c] of God" (**15:39**).

This One who died upon the Tree was more than just a man; He was from above. Jesus' response to the religious leaders sets the tone for His penetrating words about His prior existence: "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. [24] I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be,[a] you will indeed die in your sins (**Mark 8:23-24**). His language is loaded with His concept of His own uniqueness with God. Jesus, at least on one occasion, called attention to His unique language concerning His preexistence: "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. [43] Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say" (**John 8:42-43**). Jesus, in His prayer to the Father, speaks of His oneness with the Father: " I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one" (**17:11**).

Shortly after this prayer, one witnesses God's atoning and redeeming action in the crucifixion of that Man upon His Cross. This event cannot be described simply as some theological fiction, but rather as a historical fact; that is to say, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (**2 Corinthians 5:19**). In this atonement, One observes God in Christ transforming the worst of humanity into children of God through Christ's redeeming work upon the Cross. In this dastardly deed perpertrated against God, nevertheless, one sees God making this most heinous crime the occasion of His amazing grace. One stands in awe of such forgiveness. The Cross is not only an act of Pilate, but it is also an act of God. This is the Gospel that has moved the world. This Gospel elicits sheer wonder about forgiveness through faith in His Son.

In the Cross of Jesus, one is conscious of the paradox of the Cross—forgiveness and justice. Can God allow sin to go unpunished? How can God be just and, at the same time, justify sinful humanity? Is forgiveness immoral? Forgiveness cannot be solved by some argumentative theory of philosophy, but by the Cross of Jesus towering, as it were, in triumph over sin. In the Cross of Jesus, one witnesses justice and love in unison; it is also in the Cross that one observes righteousness and grace fused together. One can only explain the blending together of justice and love as well as righteousness and grace through the Cross. Paul deals with sin and grace along with righteousness and love in the Book of Romans. He confronts God's justice and forgiveness face-to-face in his treatment of Jesus as God's atonement as God's justification for His forgiveness:

> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [22] This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [25] God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,[a] through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— [26] he did it to

demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (**Romans 3:21-26**).

One cannot logically explain how two mutually exclusive elements—justice and forgiveness—can be fused together. Nevertheless, one can see and receive the combining of the two elements as a historical fact in the Cross. Upon Calvary, one sees One who is Goodness and Love personified, which demonstrates God's grace in dealing redemptively with evil in the place it is most concrete, namely, the suffering and death of Jesus. The Cross is not fictitious, but actual. The Cross portrays God's holy love Incarnate, which love sets forth the paradox of God's forgiveness. Just a casual glance at the sayings of Christ reveals how He interpreted His redeeming work in terms of His self-sacrifice upon the altar of Calvary. Luke reports the following words of Jesus about His historic destiny: "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed" (**Luke 12:50**)! Jesus knew that the Cross was His historic destiny. As His ministry upon earth was coming to an end, He took His disciples aside and explained to them what must happen in Jerusalem—His death and resurrection:

> We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death [19] and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life" (**Matthew 20:18-19**)!

As one seeks to unravel this mystery hidden from ages past in God, one is confronted with the mystery of the kingdom of God, that is, Jesus must suffer and die. It is in this paradox of the Cross that God's holiness is made known redemptively in and through the Cross of Jesus. This is the message of salvation. This is the message of redemption. This is the Gospel of Redemption through Christ. In the final hours of His earthly sojourn, one observes Jesus moving from Gethsemane to Calvary. One sees Jesus, not as a passive victim in the drama unfolding, but as an actor throughout this ordeal. Jesus is conscious of this death for the sins of humanity. He Himself lays down His own life. John reports the following words of Jesus about His own death: "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (**John 10:17-18**).

In the final hours of Jesus' life, He shows no trace of sentimentality or self-pity for His impending doom upon the Cross. Shortly before eating the Passover with His disciples, one hears the words of Jesus as He reflects upon the world in bondage: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children" (**Luke 23:29**). Even on the Cross, one hears the voice of a conqueror: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (**Luke 23:34**). Jesus knows what He is doing—fulfilling the prophecy of **Isaiah 53**. He is fusing justice and forgiveness together. In this one act of self-sacrifice, one sees mercy and holiness kissing each other. Upon the Tree, He reigns. As one looks at the Cross of Jesus, one observes the Son of God in action for the sins of humanity. He is strong and selfless to the very point where history is torn into two parts—BC and AD. In his final moments, He cries out: "It is finished" (**John 19:30**). This is what God's Gospel is all about.

Upon the Cross, Christ is not a passive victim in this drama of sin and salvation, but rather, He is a voluntary actor throughout this whole ordeal of suffering as a sacrifice for sin.

Upon Calvary, one witnesses the utter desolation of the Son of God. He cries out in anguish: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (**Matthew 27:46**)? As one seeks to comprehend this cry, one cannot help but wonder if this outburst of grief describes the Son of God staggering under the fact and burden of sin as only the sinless Son of God could do? Is Jesus saying "amen" on behalf of sinful humanity to God's righteous judgment upon sin in all its hideousness and rebelliousness against the throne of God? Only He who could realize the full extent of the desolation and enmity against God could make such a cry—" My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Did Jesus make this cry in order to prevent sinful men and women from having to cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In this explosion of heartache, one hears the awful cry of abandonment from the Cross to remind sinful humanity of that moment in which He was utterly alone. The Cross depicts the lowest point of naked blasphemy against God and His Good News of salvation by grace through faith in His Son Jesus. Yet, in spite of this rejection of His Son, Paul, as he writes to the Philippians, grabs pen and paper, as it were, to sum up the very essence of God's love and Christ's activity in this drama of redemption for lost humanity:

> If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, [2] then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. [3] Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. [4] Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: [6] Who, being in very nature[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, [7] but made himself nothing, taking the very nature[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness. [8] And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! [9] Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, [10] that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (**Philippians 2:1-11**).

CONCLUSION

In the Cross of Christ, law and love are brought together. The Cross of Jesus is the only way in which the absolute holiness of God and the absolute mercy of God are seen. Christ is God's Atonement for the sins of humanity. The biblical doctrine of atonement cannot be understood without the ideas of God's absolute holiness, God's divine wrath, and God's divine righteousness. In God, one observes the divine will to forgive as well as the divine will to punish because of His absolute holiness. All three—holiness, wrath, righteousness—are found in the Cross of Jesus. Unless one

takes the reality of God's wrath seriously, one cannot take his or her guilt seriously. God's wrath responds to one's guilt and sin. God's answer to the dilemma of men and women can only be found in God's Gospel. It is on the Cross that Jesus tasted the full sense of remoteness from God as He bore the sins of humanity: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

God has revealed Himself in Jesus. The full revelation of God's Gospel is seen in the life, birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Cross of Jesus, one observes an actual objective transaction. In other words, God does something that is absolutely necessary for the redemption of humanity. This is what the Gospel of God is about. The Cross, for the believer, is the sign of faith; it is the sign of God's community; and it is the sign of the revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ. The Gospel of God is a movement from God to men and women. The one who believes in these divine acts—the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus—receives salvation. It is only at the Cross that one sees fully what separates one from God. In the Cross, God's mercy transcends all human standards. Jesus Christ, in His person, is in actuality the central point and focus of God's Gospel. The Gospel of God is about the self-offering of God for the sins of humanity—this is God's Gospel. It is God who takes the burden upon Himself. The Gospel is about the self-movement of God toward men and women for their redemption. If one rejects God's Atonement, one remains severed from the God of love. In conclusion, Paul's words to the Romans sets forth the wonder of God's Gospel:

> I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. [17] For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,[a] just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" [b] (**Romans 1:16-17**).

[1]All Scripture citations are from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, c1984), unless stated otherwise.

a *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua,* which means *the LORD saves.*

a Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7

a Or *from my mother's womb*

a Or *you at the first*

a Psalm 22:1

b Some manuscripts do not have *heard his cry and.*

c Or *a son*

a Or *I am he*; also in verse 28

a 25Or *as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin*

a Or *in the form of*

b Or *the form*

a Or *is from faith to faith*

b Hab. 2:4